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Crossing the Waters: Following Jesus through the Storms, the Fish, the Doubt, and the Seas

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FOLLOWING JESUS
THROUGH THE STORMS, THE FISH,
THE DOUBT, AND THE SEAS

Crossing THE Waters

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS

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INTRODUCTION

“LESLIE, can you take the skiff back to the island?” Duncan asks.

All the crewmen on the beach—seven—turn and look at me skeptically. I scan the ocean one more time. My island is just two miles away, but the waters are a tempest of urgent, roiling waves. The wind has come down since morning, but it’s still blowing about thirty miles per hour. It’s not far to go, but half of the distance I will travel will be climbing the waves skyward and then skittering down the other side. The trick is to keep the boat quartered in the waves, and to stay away from the curl and break. No one wants to travel in weather like this, especially in an open twenty-six-foot skiff, not much more than a rowboat. I know how to do it. I’ve run plenty of boats in nasty weather, but anxiety sweeps my insides.

“Sure, I can do that,” I say coolly. I have to go. My son Noah, twenty-three, is taking one skiff back, and they need someone to take the other. I’ve spent the whole day working on this other island, and if I don’t go now, I’ll be stuck here overnight with nowhere to sleep—an unpleasant prospect.

I pull up the hood of my orange rain gear against the wind,

tighten it, strap on my life jacket, cinch it, trying to look and feel nonchalant, strong. As if I am not dwarfed by the crewmen around me, men less than half my age and twice my size. As if I will not be dwarfed by those hissing seas. Even by the skiff itself. I stand in the stern, pulling my five-foot-two inches as erect as I can while the men launch me from a trailer. The long aluminum boat groans and slides into the water while eight men, all in the same orange rain gear I am wearing, push me off and watch. As soon as the water is deep enough, I let down the sixty-horsepower outboard, start it, and reverse slowly from the protected eddies.

For the first ten seconds, the water is calm enough. Then it begins. The full force of the wind catches my hood. Spray lashes my face. Each wave that lumbers across from the open ocean moves like a whale about to breach. I watch every curl, try to keep the bow angled just right. When my skiff swells upward, I see Noah a half mile ahead of me, his skiff rising and disappearing between waves, like mine. I stand taut in the boat like a single muscle. My face is awash in seawater. The ocean roars in my ears. I am scared, but I know I will be home soon.

These are the waters we cross every day. We commercial fish for salmon every summer here on this island, a one-mile mountain of green, rock, and dirt in the Gulf of Alaska, off Kodiak Island. In my better moments, whether I'm riding a wild sea, mending net on shore, or out fishing in the boats, I feel almost biblical here. I remember the stormy sea crossings of the disciples. I feel a special connection to those men fishing and washing their nets two thousand years ago by the Sea of Galilee. With a mix of astonishment and pride, I remember that Jesus chose fishermen as his very first disciples, and Peter was chief of them all! Yes, I feel it—this life on the shoreline, on the water, in

the storms, has grown my faith immensely. Though I have had numerous reasons to leave, I am still here, thirty-eight years later. This fishing life has not been easy. And following Jesus in the midst of it has been confusing and difficult. I still have so many questions. What does it really mean to “follow Jesus”? (Jesus called those fishermen away from the nets, and I am still here!) And, even more fundamental, who *is* Jesus, anyway? What is his claim on my life? What is his claim on *all* of our lives?

I tell you honestly, in the middle of my life, in the middle of *this* life—I have a lot of questions that I want answers for. But more than answers, I need to see Jesus again. I need to hear him again. I am guessing you need this as well. I am more than guessing. I have met so many who have left their faith, who have left the church, who have given up on the Bible, who have “unfollowed” Jesus. I know you have too. Clearly, many are struggling with their faith, with the church, with Jesus himself.

We wonder, too, about relevance. How can what happened two thousand years ago in a tiny Middle Eastern country matter to us now? How can the short life of a Jewish rabbi who died too soon have any claim on my life? And we’re busy. We’re tired, with too many burdens and distractions: children, work, elderly parents, health issues, careers.

Even those of us who are sure we are followers of Jesus, we have issues too! We’ve read the Gospels countless times. We’ve heard about Jesus’ miracles in more Sunday school lessons and sermons than we care to recall. We can instantly extract a moral lesson from any of the parables and miracles. We’ve got it down. The suspense is gone. The surprise is gone. We know how it all turns out. Yawn. And then when we do wake up, we’re sodden with guilt and failure. What kind of “followers” are we, anyway?

We know we haven't "taken up our cross" to follow him each day. We know we've slipped into apathy and fatigue. We know we're not living up to what God requires: to love him with all of our heart, our mind, our soul, our strength.¹

We need to go again, then, all of us. One more time. We need to enter into the story of Jesus with expectant eyes, with open ears, because these stories are the truest ever told. Nothing has more power to awaken and shake and shape us than these accounts and encounters with Jesus. This trip through the Gospels will be different than others. It's an immersive on-the-ground, in-the-water experience, just as it should be because the Gospels are anything but dry. They are dramatic, wild—and wet, set in a rich maritime culture on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. I understand something about this world; it's not so far from my own. In the midst of all these waters and words and worlds, I've been brought startlingly near to this man who claimed to be God. I want to bring you closer to see and experience for yourself.

We're looking as well for the *human* stories we have missed, the story of twelve men whom we have too easily scooped up, cleaned off, and served up merely as Bible messages, minus the messiness of real people, real fishermen—equally at home with their families and their doubts, their zeal, and their unbelief. These raw stories of the gospel will lead us more surely to whatever and whoever might be divine in the events and waters they splash around in. These stories can help us decide who we are, and whether we want to follow this man Jesus—or not.

So here's where we're going. Think of it as one giant float trip. I'll take you from whatever field, city, or neighborhood you live in, and we'll cross to my Alaskan waters. We'll ride through a

season of commercial fishing in this wild corner of the world. I want you to see, smell, and taste the waters here as I (try to) follow Jesus. We'll cross the waters to Israel as well, where I hiked the "Gospel Trail" around the Sea of Galilee and went out fishing with Galilean fishermen. And we'll step out on a new journey through the Gospels, dipping into some of the wettest, stormiest, strangest events of those three years.

"Come, follow me," Jesus beckoned to the astonished fishermen, and he beckons to us as well all these centuries later. We'll follow him, then, through those waters: the Jordan River, where he sank under river waters and rose like a dove; and the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where he strode atop the waves of a storm, broke two small fish into a feast for thousands, filled a net to breaking when no fish could be found, shouted down a storm from a sinking boat. Where he fed his friends a meal of grilled fish, commanding "feed my sheep" . . . before disappearing into heaven. I promise you a trip unlike any other.

But I have to warn you. Travel is risky, especially in Alaska, and especially in the Gospels. Storms come up, you have only oars against the sea, there are too many in the boat, everyone argues, and you can't keep the water out. Will we get to the other side safely, our minds clearer, our eyes and ears fixed on Jesus? I'm as nervous as you are as I step into the boat because I know there will be fear, high seas, and spume along the way. Maybe even some whales will breach beside us. But I also know what came after those crossings—people were healed, parties broke out, the sightless walked straight, the starving ate fish that never ran out, and twelve common men (finally) grew confident and fearless.

Maybe some of this will happen for us as well.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GATHERING OF THE WATERS

And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.
... And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

GENESIS 1:2, 9-10, ESV

It's MAY 28. Our summer begins. We're flying out from our house in Kodiak perched over the ocean to our fish camp surrounded by ocean. We're not thinking about this, of course—that our lives are divided between two islands, and the water joins them both, and the water separates them both. Do we think of the air as we breathe it?

I am flying out with my two youngest sons, Abraham and Micah, thirteen and eleven in this summer of 2014, and my assistant for the summer, Kristi. I crouch in behind them and let Kristi sit up front next to the pilot. The boys climb into the back seats of the bush plane, a six-seater. It's a wheel plane, which means if there's any reason during the flight we need to make an emergency landing, we're sunk. There's no level ground on this island crossing. Just ragged mountains. Sometimes we charter a floatplane and land on our front waters, our own beach, stepping out in knee boots, from plane to water to shore. This is the best. Should we need to drop from the sky for a crash landing, there's a water runway everywhere.

"Got your seat belts there?" the pilot asks, a young, fresh-faced guy.

The boys strap in, arguing over who gets to hold Sophie, our Yorkie. I check to make sure Kristi is fine with sitting shotgun. She shoots an excited smile back at me. I don't even remember that, the excitement of a first bush plane flight.

The engines rumble. In a minute we are taxiing off and then we're up over the ocean, banking west. I watch the rise over the water, the canneries, the container ships towed in from a vast ocean by a tugboat, and within seconds we are lost in a sea of snowed mountains. It's the end of May, but the snow

will remain for a while. The hills and town itself will be green in another week or two. But it's the water I see most. Though we are crossing the interior of the second-largest island in the United States, there is almost nowhere that water can't be seen. The deep fjord-like bays reach long, craggy fingers to massage the heart of the island. It is these two together, mountains and ocean, that have come to define beauty for me.

It is not a long journey across Kodiak Island to the island we live on and commercial fish from every summer. We fly sixty-five miles across to the village of Larsen Bay, population 50 in the winter, about 350 in the summer, counting the cannery workers. We land bumpily on a gravel airstrip, unfold our bodies, and crouch onto the wing, then jump to the dirt to help the pilot unload our 350 pounds of goods, each box weighed on a scale and marked. I am glad to see the van from the cannery, our ride down to our skiff.

My son Elisha, eighteen, is there at the cannery store in his full orange rain gear, our summer uniforms, sucking an ice cream cone when we arrive. He's been out here a month already, getting gear ready. I see he's started some kind of beard. The boys and I jump out of the van, take turns hugging Elisha and stealing bites from his ice cream. We unload the boxes from the van to the beach, then into the twenty-six-foot open aluminum skiff, our main summer transport, which will take us on a seven-mile pounding ride to our island. The whole journey is not even a hundred miles, and we don't change a single latitude, but our life here is a world apart from our life in town.

Though the trip this year has gone easily so far, travel in this country is often complicated. I remember a trip we made out

on a larger boat, traveling the twelve hours through a stormy night, with not enough bunks for all. My son Isaac slept on the galley floor, rolling from side to side. Noah tried to sleep on a galley bench. I spent half the trip out gulping fresh air on the slick deck to keep from vomiting. Other times we take our own boat, the *Cowboy*, a pudgy scow, good for carrying freight but worthless in any seas, rolling like a tub. In my early years here, we took a twenty-five-foot speedboat, until one September when we were caught in huge seas, taking on waves that nearly sank us. It was our second close call with that boat. We sold it soon after.

The day after I make it here, when my husband, Duncan, tries to fly out, the weather has turned bad. The bush plane, a Beaver, takes off anyway and makes it to Port Lions but has to land because the fog is so thick. Then something goes wrong with the plane. It is grounded by a mechanical issue, then flies back to Kodiak for another try the next day.

My daughter, Naphtali, twenty-five, and my brother-in-law are coming out to the island the next day on a thirty-two-foot boat. They leave Kodiak at midnight and will travel all night around the stormy waters of Kodiak Island, the sea still swelling with the remains of a forty-mile-per-hour northeastern blow. They'll stay alert, awake, eyes on the sonar to avoid treacherous reefs along the way. When they arrive in the morning, they'll suppress their exhaustion and join the others to put out the fishing nets all afternoon.

Isaac, twenty-one, is coming for the first month only, before leaving to continue his chemistry research with a professor in California. Noah is coming for a short visit, then it's back to California, his girlfriend, and the new job he just landed. It's

the first summer he's not returned to work. I wonder if he'll ever come back.

Tonight, though, I will curl up alone in my bed on my faraway island where no one lives but us, the island I have finally come to love. I will pray for them, for my daughter, my only daughter out on a big sea in a very small boat. I will ask Jesus to keep them safe. I will ask for Duncan's safe arrival by bush plane. I feel guilty sometimes always asking for this, as if safety is our right. But I keep asking anyway. In three weeks I will be praying for my brother-in-law and nephew, who will take that same thirty-two-foot boat a thousand miles along the desolate waters of the Alaska Peninsula to fish for red salmon in Bristol Bay.

I will pray, too, for this season on the water ahead of us. I remember the year my daughter was seventeen, her third year running her own boat. After just nine days of fishing, she stood there in the doorway in all of her rain gear, her hair in a bandana, her hands clenching at her sides. "I can't do this," she said, looking at me in despair. "I can't do another season." I looked back at her sadly, knowing how hard the last few years had been, the onslaught of salmon, the grueling weeks with little sleep, the swollen fingers. My children returned to school and college barely able to hold a pencil.

There have been years, too, when I didn't want to come back, but I did. We all did. We are still here, on the nets, in the boats, on the water, in a life encircled by salmon, who themselves are returning to die.

What is this life I have been given? Or did I choose it? Didn't I come here following Jesus? Or following my new husband? Or both? After all these years, this is what I know for sure: This

is not a safe life for either body or soul. Just gathering all of us now into this fishing life is itself a sailing, and every summer this island drifts into deep, complicated waters.

Just hours after we land and load and unload our dozens of boxes of supplies from the beach up the steep hill to the house, I see a furious splashing out by the reef in front of our house. A pod of orcas hunting down sea lions? “Micah! Abraham! Come quick!” They run to the window with me, watching strange flippers emerge, then a huge dark body leaping out of the water.

“What is it?” the boys ask together. Then I know.

“It’s a pod of fin whales. They’re lunge feeding!” My eyes are fixated on their antics. I almost can’t believe it. Fin whales are sober whales. They don’t cavort or frolic like humpbacks. They’re massive, second only to the blue whale, and they haul their heft with great solemnity about the oceans. They know what life is about. They migrate to this bay again and again every summer, like me. They’ve seen it all.

But now—there are fresh herring darting into the bay. Now it is nearly summer. Now they give up their old habits and indulge in what’s called lunge feeding. I’ve read about it but never seen it. They’re feeding on their sides, skimming and scooping up schools of herring, their usually invisible flippers flapping and slapping the water. We watch with binoculars as they rise and roll, flushing the waters with their spinning and lunging, mixing water and whale and air into a wondrous froth. Why merely sink and dive when they can spin and skim their seventy-ton bodies up onto the lovely surface and net whole schools of tasty fish? And there we are, laughing, witnessing their perfect feast, and who knows what else is possible in this watery world?

All the next day my steps are light with joy. I remember G. K. Chesterton's words:

It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never gotten tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.¹

Is it possible that already I am young again, full of hope for the season ahead? The waters that threaten us, that wear us out and down, also inspire and launch the world's heaviest creatures into the air—can it be? But it is. And I think again of the gathering of waters, the *mikveh*, the Hebrew word for that moment in Genesis when God called out all the waters above and below into a single massive body, the seas. The same word, *mikveh* (literally meaning "collection"), came to be used of every gathering of water that cleansed and purified. A convert to Judaism would immerse himself into the *mikveh*, a special pool of water for that very purpose, waters that were sometimes called "the womb of the world." As the convert came up out of the waters, he emerged new, as a child, now separated from his own pagan past. He was called "a little child just born," or "a child of one day."²

I am a "child of one day" this day, the spume of the whale washing over me. I am converted from the wear of age and time and so many trips and seasons and fear and doubt out

here—made young again by delight. And it is easy to think of God creating the oceans right now. It is easy to think of Jesus right now. So many times I am looking for him, for that man who has rescued me in such particular ways, and who remains yet so far off, so invisible that I am blinded with longing and frustration. Other times, now, he feels so present around these waters that I cannot contain it. I know it is no accident. Water saturates the Scriptures, from the Spirit hovering over the waters, to the Holy City of Revelation and the river flooding its streets, and so many places in between: streams in the desert, water from the rock, the well of living water, the *mikveh*, the gathering of the waters.

Out of nothing came water and land, came our ocean and island. Every year, my children and I launch off blindly in tiny planes or boats to return to our land and sea. And no matter how thick the fog or how high the seas, I swallow my worry and choose to believe we will arrive, that the months ahead will be fruitful, that all of us gathered around the table, gathered by the waters, will see and name all that lies ahead, finally, *good*.